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“Researching *Starsky and Hutch* Is Exquisite Torture”: Female Television Audiences and 1980s Letterzines

E. Charlotte Stevens

Abstract: *This paper reflects on work-in-progress on archived media fans’ letterzines of the 1970s and 1980s. Growing out of the science fiction APA fanzine scene, letterzines collect letters of comment (LOCs) between female fans and capture conversations about their television viewing. Zines from this period go beyond science fiction and include fandoms for cop shows such as Starsky & Hutch (ABC, 1975–1979) and Simon & Simon (CBS, 1981–1989). Letterzines, which have not typically been used as a source for exploring women’s television history, contain a range of information of interest to historians: interpretations of character and narrative, reports on fan conventions and meet-ups, and discussions of how women related to contemporary television at a time when VCRs started to saturate the domestic market. These primary source documents can potentially nuance assumptions about what women watched, their views on the programmes, and the contexts in which they watched.*

This paper reflects on the initial steps of my work on media fans’ letterzines from the 1970s and 1980s, drawing on collections held by the Toronto Public Library (Canada) and the Cushing Memorial Library and Archives at Texas A&M University (USA). Growing out of the science fiction amateur press association (APA) tradition of apazines, letterzines are a kind of fanzine explicitly designed to share letters of comment (LOCs) in which fans discuss their television viewing. Significantly, the editors, contributors, and readers of these periodicals were almost exclusively women, meaning that these collections capture women’s accounts of television viewing. In recent years I visited the Toronto Public Library’s Merrill Collection of Science Fiction, Speculation & Fantasy twice, was granted access to digitised material held by Texas A&M, and have read through letterzines dedicated to series such as *Star Trek* (NBC, 1966–69), *Starsky & Hutch* (ABC, 1975–79), and *Simon & Simon* (CBS, 1981–89). They contain a range of information of interest to media studies: interpretations of character and narrative, reports on fan conventions and meet-ups, and discussions of how women related to contemporary television at a time when VCRs started to saturate the domestic market. However, I have been at a loss for how to theorise my approach to studying letterzines, and what role letterzines can play in histories of television.

I am motivated by excitement about what fanzine archives have to offer to the study of television histories, but also by a concern that much media scholarship, and its attendant methodologies, privileges attention to the words on the page over the function and history of the objects themselves. Michelle Caswell points out that humanities scholars romanticise and inflate an idea of “the archive” and mis-characterise archival studies as lacking theorisation (para. 8), whereas archival studies scholars are busy theorising and working with actual archives. This short article has two purposes: to highlight the existence of letterzines as a potentially rich resource for study, and to draw on work within archival studies to tentatively suggest a methodological approach to these letterzines. In many ways, my concerns echo Jackie

Stacey's questions regarding audiences' accounts of remembered film spectatorship, namely how to "move beyond the simplistic ascription of audiences' responses as the 'authentic truth' about media meaning" (74). One key difference is that, in the case of letterzines, these are not responses guided by my questions to the viewers but are materials that had emerged organically through community conversation. Letterzines have the potential to be evidence, but of what, for what purpose, and what is at stake when we take them on?

What Are Letterzines?

Letterzines are part of a tradition of science fiction fan writing that dates from the early twentieth century (Coppa 42–43; Westfahl 187), but that diverged and diversified once female fans of *Star Trek* struck out on their own in the 1970s into what is now known as media fandom (Coppa 45–46). Most writing about media fanzines has focused on fanfiction zines (Bacon-Smith; Cicione; Gillilan; Jenkins; Penley), whereas the letterzines I have reviewed focus on LOCs, covering discussions of episodes and characters, reviews of fanfiction zines, and reports of conventions and viewing parties. Letterzines have not been used as a source for historical work, with now-decades-old academic engagements by Cinda Gillilan and Henry Jenkins using them as accounts of contemporary practice. Looking through letterzines gives access to a particular moment in the histories of women's productive fandom. It also presents a compelling mix of fans' analysis of programmes, discussions of fanworks, and descriptions of how, when, and where they watch television.

Writing about music zines, Lucy Robinson argues that zines can be "an invaluable way into the messy traces left by subcultures, DIY and fan cultures, and the politics of identity" (39). In the case of letterzines these messy traces are largely emotional: for example, LOCs contain heightened rhetoric including language of addiction, used to frame watching many episodes at once (Stevens). The title of this article quotes a 1982 letter in a *Starsky & Hutch* letterzine, in which "watching all eighty-seven episodes in a week-end" is described as "exquisite torture" but also as "a hell of a lot of fun" (KH 13). The letter is an extensively footnoted list of facts about Hutch (David Soul), compiled mostly through close reading of the episodes. Beyond the familiar experience of screening for textual analysis being both fun and torturous, it is notable that letter-writer KH names this activity as "researching" rather than "watching", implying a scholarly rigour underpinning this dissemination activity. Gillilan and Jenkins frame letterzines as hosting fan's discussion and evaluation of episodes and characters, but the organised and productive viewing practices that underpin the letters is not framed as research activity. One possible direction for the study of letterzines is to ask how these letter-writers' conversations can or should be considered research.

KH's letter is a trace of several fan practices. Her viewing and her research practice are only possible due to domestic videotape and off-air recordings of reruns, which enabled fans to collect episodes and perpetuate post-object fandom after the series was cancelled (Williams). The letter's content is evidence of a network of women's talk about television, typical of a letterzine, which are "sites for fan interaction, discussion, and participation with a particular series, its characters, and actors" (Gillilan 183). It also provides an account of the appeal of re-watching a generic episodic buddy cop series:

Part of the pleasure of a television program like *Starsky and Hutch* is gleaning the tiny bits of background and personality from each episode and putting them together like a

jigsaw puzzle. These men are mysteries with little clues dropped along the way for the viewer to find, study, and explain. (KH 13)

The many forthright accounts of desire in these LOCs echo Hazel Collie’s findings on the centrality of the “relationship between television, women, and desire” throughout the history of women’s spectatorship (223). LOCs contain both original commentary and responses to previous letters that carry on a conversation in multiple directions, using the format to “create and re-create consensus regarding the meaning and significance of the series and its characters” (Gillilan 184). The letterzines capture what these fans thought about the programmes they loved, including their attraction to the actors on screen. As can be seen from this example, letterzines from the 1980s go beyond their science fiction origins—and indeed, with genres and formats typically associated with women’s interests—with a number focusing on cop shows such as *Starsky & Hutch* and *Simon & Simon*.

Process and Methods

This article asks how to use letterzines as primary source documents for media studies research, with some preliminary observations. In terms of ethics, one of the pleasures of reading through these letterzines is how they show off viewers’ unfettered enthusiasms; however, as these are letters written between friends and not for a wider audience, I am careful about attaching what fans call “wallet names” to the comments. Permissions for access and use are sometimes governed by the copyright status of these periodicals and agreements signed in the accession (Brett). I have chosen to anonymise the letters (as one might do with responses to questionnaires or interviews) rather than credit the letter-writers in full.



Figure 1: Author’s own photograph of the Merrill Collection research undertaken in 2018.

For access, a range of collection practices lead to different barriers for academics and for fans who have an interest in the history of their community. The Merrill Collection is only viewable in their public reading room, with fanzine records kept on hand-written index cards

in two card catalogue drawers. These sometimes include editor/publisher information but are often limited to title and issue/year; I spent my visits identifying letterzines and photographing these for future review. In contrast, the Texas A&M collections have online records, listing zine title, editor/publisher, issue number, publication month/year, fandom, and type (fiction, letterzine) in a searchable format. To access these, I formally requested digital copies of specific issues by catalogue reference number, some of which required digitisation, while others were provided as searchable PDFs. I noticed that reading, coding, and processing letterzines is different when working with image files as opposed to searching in a PDF, which may have affected my analysis and choice of examples.

Following colleagues' suggestions, I have started exploring archival studies literature to see whether this field can prompt questions and offer useful framings for media studies work. From this, I am testing out language to describe letterzines: not as objects, or artefacts, but records. In archival studies, a "record" is more than a document, and "potentiality" is fundamental to its theorisation: a record is "*capable* of serving as evidence in support of claims about the past by a wide range of users" (Caswell, para.9, emphasis in original). Thinking of letterzines as records can help prevent an impulse to unreflexively read historical fact in their pages, and instead to account for how they are collected, archived, accessed, and then how they are used to make claims about the past.

Some archival studies work speaks to the value of science fiction fanzine collections; this work understands "fanzines as practices and communities" (Lynn 36) rather than only as literature. I am mindful of developing an approach that does not see letterzines as a source to be "tapped for facts" without addressing their journey into and out of an archive (Caswell, para.11). The messy intimacy of zines in general forces historians to recall "that the historical conversation involves collecting, curating, cataloguing and analysing texts in as broad a way as imaginable" (Robinson 50). Zines may prove to be a useful fulcrum to draw humanities into closer conversation with archival studies through broadening our imagination of the historical roles of media texts.

From my beginner's understanding of records continuum theory—in which "the capacity of records to function as instruments of governance and accountability, form memory, shape identity, and provide value-added sources of information, is bound up with their evidentiary qualities—their transactionality and contextuality" (McKemish 352)—it seems that deeper engagement with archival studies will help to account for letterzines as an evidentiary trace of activity (as periodicals published by/for a fan community) as well as their multiple functions and purposes (represented through accumulating metadata, of which this paper is a part). This may help to account for letterzines as both media products and documents of fan/audience engagement with media; more broadly, this paradigm models an approach to narrativising and analysing media histories.

Women's Talk about Television

To end, letterzines offer a corpus of women's talk about television that is similar to, yet distinct from, previous studies of women as television audiences. For example, Christine Geraghty's survey of literature on soap opera audiences points out that discussion of characters, actors, and plotlines is a regular theme of work on these audiences (316–19). Regarding media fandom, Cassandra Amesley (327) notes the importance of oral conversation while watching to establish interpretive communities around a series. In this respect, letterzines are a form of

written-down conversation. Indeed, Mary Ellen Brown (103–5) cites early fan studies work (Bacon-Smith 7–43) on fanfiction zines to characterise that network of amateur fiction publication as a subversive cultural space of women’s “talk”. However, in the case of letterzines, it is not necessary to analyse fanfiction to find out what fans think about a character, as the talk is there to be read in the letters themselves.

In contrast to other ethnographic work, letterzines are exciting because they capture discussions that emerge from a community without a researcher’s questions setting the agenda for responses. Letterzines offer records of women’s conversation with each other, rather than letters directed to authorities such as the editors of the film magazine *Picturegoer* or the corporate readers of letters to the BBC. In form and content, they are organic “backstage” accounts of television viewing, performed for friends. As archival records, letterzines can potentially nuance our assumptions about what women watched, their views on the programmes, and the contexts in which they watched.

This paper presents television fans’ letterzines as a potential source for historical television research. It asks an overall question about letterzines as evidence and zines as a source for historical media studies research. It reflects on the process of archival research. It offers descriptions of television audience behaviour from fan audiences themselves, which have the potential to complement contemporary ethnographies. My hope for the future of media studies is to develop a robust method for encountering media histories; letterzines seem like a compelling place to start.

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